THERE'S A WORM IN THE APPLE
Genesis 3:1-13, Romans 7:18-25
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The topic will win no popularity contest. The simple fact is that none of us wants to be told that there is something wrong with the human condition, and particularly our human condition. The story is told of a tiny church in the hills of Appalachia. The preacher was breathing hell fire and brimstone, condemning adultery, stealing, lying, murder, dancing, movies: after each broadside a little old woman in the back pew responded vigorously, "Amen, Brother. Tell it. Praise the Lord." Then the preacher directed his attention to chewing tobacco. And the woman responded, "Now you've stopped preachin' and gone to meddlin'!"

There's something like that in each of us, I suppose. We don't mind considering sin in the abstract, or even the particular, so long as the object of our attention is someone else. We do not appreciate, however, the inference that we are involved. Besides, we've had enough of that. We're learning that the lack of self-esteem is a primal psychological dynamic for most of us. The Transactional Analysis school of Psychiatry is telling us that we carry around feelings of "not OK-ness" all our lives and try desperately and unsuccessfully to prove that we are "OK". We are told that the Christian doctrine of Original Sin is, in no small measure, responsible for the fact that many people feel perpetually guilty and are never able to live comfortably with their own humanity. Why make matters worse by adding to the burden of guilt and insecurity and feelings of inadequacy that most people bear? No less an authority on human relations than Erich Segal, after all, has proclaimed that "love means never having to say you're sorry" which, by the way, I regard as a candidate for the single worst statement ever made. Norman Lear is at least honest when discussing their relationship Edith Bunker says: "I was just thinking. In all the years we have been married, you never once said you was sorry." Archie responds: "Edith, I'll gladly say I'm sorry - if I ever do anything wrong." It is no coincidence, by the way, that Archie can't say, "I love you" either. (Spencer Marsh, God, Man and Archie Bunker, p.30).

Why bother with the topic? Why a sermon on sin instead of more enlightening and uplifting matters? Because I believe that dishonesty about the human condition is responsible for history's greatest tragedies. I would submit that one of the geniuses of the Judeo-Christian heritage is its view of humanity. I would submit that both Jews and Christians have the most honest and most accurate anthropology in the market place of ideas. And I would submit that the guilt-producing negativism we ordinarily associate with the idea of sin is an aberration, a misunderstanding; that, in fact, our honest approach sees more potential, and is a higher, holier and more hopeful view of humanity than any other.

The problem is one, first of all, of misunderstanding. Dr. Seward Hiltner, Professor of Theology and Personality at Princeton, suggests that if you ask the average churchman about theology he will be terribly vague. "But if he is asked about sin, he may be sure that he knows what it is. And he will very probably be wrong. There is no theological idea that has fallen victim to such widespread misunderstanding." (Theological Dynamics, p.81).

In the first place we ordinarily think about sin in terms of petty vices, stealing, cheating, lying. The revivalistic tradition in Protestantism and conservative Roman Catholicism have notoriously over-simplified the matter. If sin is no more profound than the occasional breaking of the common ground rules of moral

behavior it is not a serious problem: it can also be overcome, simply by trying harder. We mean more than that, however. St. Paul suggested that there is something about us that prevents us from doing the good even when we know what it is. Psychiatry often supports that view.

In the second place, we have defined sin too long in a literalistic interpretation of the Fall in Genesis 3. The result has been a devastating propensity to regard sin solely in sexual terms. Adam and Eve didn't know they were naked until they ate the fruit: then they were embarassed: and when they were exiled from the Garden and started to make babies, their original sin was passed on genetically. Thus the Christian Church has, at times, concluded that sin is transmitted sexually, children are conceived in it. The logical deduction is that sex itself is sinful: celibacy is best - which is about as far from the lusty, life-affirming view of the Old Testament as it is possible to get.

That is not what we mean either. There are many good reasons for growing beyond a literal interpretation of Genesis. The best, however, is that in this case literalism is misleading. Eden is on no map. Adam means every man: Eve, every woman. It is a gorgeous, metaphorical expression of the human condition, and in the expression, I would suggest, it is accurate.

Again "All in the Family" is a helpful setting. In his little volume, God, Man and Archie Bunker, Spencer Marsh says, "Archie is a cigar-smoking Adam with clothes on. He is a fugitive from the Garden of Eden." And then paraphrases Genesis 3 in a way I should like to borrow: "Adam and his wife Eve lived in a park called Eden. Eden Park seems to have had everything a desert-living people would dream of including an abundance of trees which provide shade as well as an abundance of fruit.

"All the fruit is for the pleasure of Adam and Eve except for that one tree, which they are not to eat and which they do not touch until a serpent comes along with an exciting promise. If they eat the prohibited fruit, they will be like God. Knowing they will never get a better offer, and not realizing the serpent is a liar they eat the fruit.

"Time passes and the scene ends with two bloated nudes sitting under an empty tree surrounded by a giant pile of apple cores. (Or more realistically, olive pits).

"That desire to be like God led to their downfall, and to the downfall of all humanity since. A God is whatever is Number One in a person's life, and with Adam and Eve it was 'self' that received that first slot." (p.31-33). The author concludes that violence in the world, hell within families, alienation in personal relationships are the result of human beings elevating self to first priority in life.

That is the first and classic Christian idea of sin: selfishness, egotism, pride. The philosophers and theologians regard it as part of the givenness of the human condition. To be human is, by nature, to be self-centered. We are motivated by primal drives toward self-preservation, self-protection and security. But to be self-centered is to be out of sync with one's neighbors and one's God. Bertrand Russell was no Christian but he understood the human condition. He wrote, "Every man would like to be God, if it were possible; some few find it difficult to admit the impossibility." (Power, A New Social Analysis, p.11).

Sin as selfishness, self-centeredness may, I believe, be observed along the entire spectrum of human behavior: in the notion, for instance, that my race is better than all other races and therefore I have the right to subjugate, eliminate, discriminate against, dislike and not go to school with people of another race. Or in the simple little game of "mine is better than yours" which we play with such fervor, and which prevents us even from listening to one another, or in the insistence in marriage that my gratification takes precedence over yours.

I continue to be impressed with the realism of that view of humanity. And I continue to regard that kind of sin as something for which we should be ashamed - regardless of the arena in which we are committing it, and about which we need to say "I'm sorry" to God and to one another and from which we need to be delivered. In purely theological terms sin is always against God, because it has no room for Him. When I am busily putting another person down, for instance, what is happening in terms of theological dynamics, is that God who is the Father of both of us has been pushed aside to make a place for my expansive ego.

But there is another side to it. An awareness of sin as egotism can be paralyzing. To combat our pride, we can try to be humble and discover before long that we are feeling rather proud of our humility which is certainly more profound than our neighbor's. The discovery can be paralyzing. We can be so sensitive to our own ego cravings that we lose the ability to enjoy life; feel guilty about feeling good, and refuse to extend ourselves for fear that we might end up regarding ourself too highly. The other side of the matter, as far as I'm concerned, is sloth - the propensity to be less rather than more than, we are.

Think again about the Genesis 3 story. In the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve are given dominion, responsibility and power over the rest of creation. The first thing Eve does is to allow a serpent to talk her into eating the forbidden fruit. The first thing Adam does is allow Eve to talk him into following suit. They aren't so much egotistical and arrogant as they are lazy. When God confronts them with their offense Adam tries to slip out from under personal responsibility for his behavior by pointing the accusing finger at Eve. Eve blames it on the serpent. That is to say humanity is here pictured not only in terms of egotism, but most certainly the abdication of personal responsibility; the refusal to be as much and as big and as self-determining as they could be.

Even more than pride, I have come to appreciate moral laziness as the relevant sin of our time. The early church called it "sloth", a word not used much anymore but a good one nonetheless. It is, according to Harvey Cox, "the refusal to live up to one's essential humanity...the unwillingness to revel in the delights or to share the responsibilities of being fully human." (Who's Killing the Church, p.111-112).

Sloth is the great American Middle Class Sin of not giving a damn. It is what makes injustice possible: it allows evil to assume monstrous proportions because no one cares enough to be responsible. Dr Hiltner comments: "If we set out to destroy the world, the best combination we could find would be dictators convinced that they are right and (people) who couldn't care less about anything beyond the immediate environs." (op.cit., p.97).

Indifference, not caring, not being responsible, taking the easy way out, is what we're talking about. Beginning this evening and continuing for four nights there will be a Television experience available for anyone interested in the form

this kind of sin can take. Watching the Holocaust will not be pleasant. We're going to react to it in the same way we find ourselves reacting to the Prayer of Confession: "I didn't do that: I'm not that evil." The point is that the very flower of Christian civilization allowed it to happen: not that every German was a Nazi - but that they - and we - stood by and watched. The Time Magazine review last week included this statement: "In Holocaust most Nazis are seemingly normal people who all too easily answer the call of a racist and fascist government...(it) forces us to wonder whether we might ever collaborate with an immoral government for the sake of opportunism and self-preservation."

I don't want to see it again. Even less do I want to risk forgetting about it. I don't want my children to be disturbed. But even less do I want them to know something other than the truth about the human condition, about what can and does happen when normally good people don't care.

Several years ago Karl Menninger wrote an excellent book, Whatever Became of Sin, in which he suggested eloquently that the overwhelming psychological dynamic of our age has been the reduction of the individual to insignificance. Along with that reduction has been the excusing of the individual from any responsibility for our common life, or for that matter, for personal life. It is all out of our hands. We are either the victim of genetics, or social conditioning, or bad parenting: our lives are determined by big government, multi-national corporations, big labor. And the real temptation is to despair - which means burying oneself in the comic strips or nightly televised pap or the pursuit of instant gratification. That's the sin I'm concerned about: a potent and complex combination of egotism and laziness.

And so I will continue to put my money on Genesis 3. I know the self-destructive power of unresolved guilt and that the only resolution is forgiveness. I regard that moment in our liturgy when the minister says, "Friends, Believe the Good News of the Gospel" and we respond, "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven" as a very happy moment. Remembering a little history, looking at current events, I regard a religion that pats me on the back and tells me all is well with the world, and that I'll be all right if I simply try harder, as nonsense, not worth my time.

But most of all I continue to be intrigued by the idea that God wants us to be more than we are. I am stimulated and haunted by that ancient picture of our humanity as the bearers of God's image, His co-creators, the ones with the potential to be so much more thatn we ever dared imagine. I am haunted by that Hebrew insight that Adam's sin was not so much his vanity and egotism, as it was his laziness, his refusal to be the man God created him to be. I am cheered and saved from despair by the Good News that God did not give up on His creation, but sent a new Adam, a model of a new humanity available to every man and woman.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a call - not to servility, not to self-deprecation, not to a lifetime of wallowing in self-imposed guilt. Rather it is a call to become all that we were created to become. It is based, not on a hard, moral demand, but on God's patient love; a love powerful enough to stand with us when we fall and call out of us reserves of potential we didn't even know existed. The Good News is not that we are sinners, doomed to drown in our own guilt, but that there is a new life now available. In Jesus Christ God has promised to accept us and forgive us and love us, and in that accepting, forgiving, loving, to give us the power to live creatively in the days ahead. "In Christ", the promise goes, "we are new creatures altogether. The past is finished and gone. Everything is fresh and new." We respond to the Gospel when we seize the responsibility for our own lives: when we summon the stamina to be responsible for self - and for the world. We respond to the Gospel when we move in the direction of becoming fully and joyfully and responsibly human.

Amen.